C.I.A. Asked Tax Assessor's Aid on Ship

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LOS ANGELES, April 3—The Los Angeles County tax assessor said today that four men purportedly representing the Central Intelligence Agency tried to enlist his aid in covering up the true mission of the Glomar Explorer, the vessel built by Howard R. Hughes for the C.I.A.

The assessor, Philip E. Watson, said the four men sought to conceal the Glomar Explorer's top secret project by getting him to reduce the tax assessment against Mr. Hughes's Summa Corporation.

The Glomar Explorer, with her companion barge, the HMB-1, reportedly recovered part of a sunken Soviet submarine last August from the Pacific Ocean in a project financed by the Federal Government.

Mr. Watson said that the four men, whom he declined to identify, called on him last July 31 and expressed concern that his tax assessment might "blow the cover" on the Glomar Explorer's mission.

He said that two of the men were identified as Los Angeles residents, one was a Houston lawyer and the fourth an F.B.I. agent from Washington. He said none of them presented C.I.A. credentials.

Question of Ownership

"They said that they were afraid that if the true cost of the boat was listed at perhaps $300-million, it would excite suspicion," Mr. Watson said. "Somebody is going to say, 'Who owns a $300-million boat?' "

Public announcement of the construction of the ship declared that she was financed by Mr. Hughes's wholly owned Summa Corporation and built as an ocean-mining vessel. Last month it became known that the vessel and her barge had been paid for with Federal funds, unofficially estimated at as much as $400-million.

Mr. Watson said that the four men were brought to him by a Los Angeles Federal Bureau of Investigation agent, who showed his credentials and said, "These men are from the C.I.A.," then left Mr. Watson's office.

"They informed me that the Federal Government had title to the Glomar Explorer and the barge and that therefore there was no tax liability," Mr. Watson said. Federal property is not subject to local taxes.

"But when I asked them to give me a letter to this effect, they declined to do so," Mr. Watson said.

"What bewildered me was that they suggested that I levy a tax on 1 per cent of the Glomar's assessed value, rather than on the customary 25 per cent," the assessor said. "Privately owned oceanographic vessels can be assessed at the 1 per cent rate. But if the Glomar Explorer was in fact owned by the Federal Government, no one owed any taxes," he said.

'True Mission' Disclosed

"This was the first time in my career as tax assessor that anyone offered to pay taxes they didn't owe," Mr. Watson added.

If Mr. Hughes owns the Glomar Explorer and her true value is $400-million, Mr. Watson said the tax bill would run "about $9-million a year."

"The other thing that bothered me was that they voluntarily disclosed to me what they said was the true mission of the Glomar and its barge," Mr. Watson said. "They said it was sent out to plant complex sensing devices on the ocean floor to detect Polaris-type missiles and other Russian ship and aircraft movements."

"I always thought that C.I.A. people were close-mouthed," Mr. Watson said. "I didn't need to know the Glomar Explorer's real mission. All I had to know was that it belonged to the Federal Government, not the Hughes corporation."

The assessor said that he was "keeping his options open" about the assessment and that he had four years in which to determine the proper tax. He said that the Summa Corporation was scheduled to file its tax declaration next month and that he would wait to see what the Hughes organization reports about the ownership of the vessel.

The New York Times learned that one of the four "C.I.A. representatives" who called on Mr. Watson was Steven T. Schoenbaum, a representative of the Summa Corporation's ocean mining division. Mr. Schoenbaum said he had "no comment" about the matter.

Mr. Watson expressed the belief that the Glomar Explorer had a sea-mining capacity, whatever else she was equipped to do. He was given a manganese nodule that his callers told him had been retrieved from 17,000 feet under the ocean. Mr. Watson is using it as a paper weight.